

REPORT.

THE Joint Committee to whom was referred the question of considering the desirableness of establishing State farms and industrial settlements as a means of alleviating the evils arising from irregularity of employment have the honour to report as follows:—

First, in regard to State farms: State farms may be considered to mean farms where the ordinary operations of farming are managed or controlled not by those working on the land, but by the Government or its agents; or, in other words, farms where those working have no direct interest arising from the profit or loss of the farm.

Second: Industrial settlements are settlements where the direct interest of the worker in the success or non-success of the settlement is maintained, and this fact chiefly distinguishes an industrial settlement from a State farm. A more detailed definition of the Committee's view will be found in the concluding paragraphs of this report.

In collecting evidence on the subject the Committee did not deem it necessary to extend their inquiry into the working of Continental labour colonies. It is well known that those colonies are chiefly peopled by enfeebled persons, discharged prisoners, and suspected tramps; and, although we have representatives of these classes in this colony, they are not with us the pressing danger that they are in the congested populations of Europe. Fortunately, with us their number is small, and if State farms are established in our midst it will not be for the purpose of dealing effectively with them, but rather with the view of arresting the growth amongst us of such an undesirable element.

With some modification, the above remarks will apply to the attempts now being made in England. It is true there are no State farms in the Home-country, but recently settlements have been started there by philanthropic effort which resemble State institutions in nearly every essential characteristic. The inmates of these English colonies belong, no doubt, to a higher social grade than those who drift into the labour colonies of the Continent; but the experience of both emphasizes the fact that intelligence and character in the people who are to be assisted are the greatest factors in success, and that in this respect the labour colonies of Europe have much greater difficulties to meet than would have to be met in this colony. It also clearly shows that in our case the settlement should not be viewed as a home for the vicious or incompetent.

The above-mentioned considerations induced the Committee to confine their view to what has been done in the neighbouring Colonies of Australia. Induced, no doubt, by the great number of people who were out of employment at the time, the Governments of Victoria, New South Wales, and South Australia entered in 1893 on the establishment of various forms of settlement. Some of these closely resembled our own village-settlement scheme; others our improved-farm system; and provision was also made for settlements to be worked on a system of co-operation or collective ownership. The greater number of these latter were established in South Australia, and are occupied by registered associations of workers; but, in considering the fortunes of these Australian labour colonies or settlements, it is well to bear in mind the different systems of management. In South Australia, where the greatest success has been attained, the settlements were managed by "a board of not less than three trustees, one of whom shall be chairman, to be elected by the villagers in manner prescribed by the rules." In Victoria, where failure has been most pronounced, the land was vested in five trustees, and every man in the colony who chose to subscribe to the funds of the settlement had the right to vote at the election of a committee of management of four members, and had a vote for each member of the committee for every £1 so subscribed. In New South Wales the Governor appointed the board of control, consisting of not less than eight or more than sixteen members, one-fourth to be women.

The Hon. W. P. Reeves paid a visit to these settlements some time prior to his departure for England, and in a report which he issued on his return he predicted the disaster which ultimately fell, and could not fail to fall on settlements so cumbrously and inefficiently managed. Indeed, it is difficult to understand what could have prompted the Victorian Government to attempt the promotion of an all but untried form of settlement on the lines laid down in Part III. of the Act of 1893. The Surveyor-General's report for 1896, which declared that, so far as settlement under Part III. was concerned, the Act had been a failure, should not have occasioned surprise to any one.

The only settlement in Victoria which appears to be doing good work, and is instructive to the Committee, as it is a genuine State farm, is the labour colony of Leongatha, which since 1894 has been under the direct supervision of the Lands Department.

Mr. J. E. March, Superintendent of Village Settlements, who in 1895 visited and reported on these Australian settlements, attended and gave evidence; and three gentlemen who had given the subject considerable attention were also summoned, and placed their views before the Committee.

Mr. J. Mackay, of the Labour Department, was also examined regarding the management and present position of the State farm at Levin, and, at the request of your Committee, a statement conveying other information regarding the farm was furnished by the department, which will be found along with the reports and evidence respecting the Australian labour colonies now laid on the table. The statement brings into view the natural difficulties which had to be encountered in hewing a settlement of 800 acres in area out of a crowded forest of heavy timber, unrelieved by a single patch of open country.

Founded by the present Government, it is our first institution of the kind, and the good judgment of the founders is seen in the suitability of its position and fertility of its soil.

The papers herewith laid before the Committee are,—

(1.) Extract from Mr. March's report.

(2 and 3.) Reports for 1896 and 1897 of Colonel Goldstein, Superintendent of the Victorian State farm at Leongatha.

(6.) Report for this year (1898) on the several co-operative settlements in South Australia.

(7.) Certain detailed information as to the cost, progress, and present position of the State farm at Levin. [See Appendix G.]